Scholastic Medical Sciences

Review Article

Volume 3 Issue 1 January 2026

Systematic Review on the Effectiveness of Palliative Care Interventions in Managing Pain in Terminally Ill Patients

Ahmad mohammed saleh[1], Hessah binzayed[2], Mohammed Abdulrhman Alamri[3], Abdulrahman alshehri[4], Muner Abdulrahman Alshehri[5], Abdullah Hamdan Mohammed Alshehri[6], Abdulhakeem Ahmad Assiri[7]

[1] *King fahad medical city, Palliative care*

[2] *Palliative care medicine -King fahad medical city,*

[3] *King Fahad Medical City, Palliative care*

[4] *King Fahad Medical City, Palliative care*

[5] *Palliative medicine department, King Fahad Medical City*

[6] *King Fahad Medical City, Palliative care*

[7] *Palliative Care department, King Fahad Medical City*

Corresponding Author: Ahmad mohammed saleh, King fahad medical city, Palliative care, Saudi Arabia.

Received: December 05, 2025; **Published:** December 08, 2025

Abstract

Background: Among terminally ill patients, pain is a rather common and upsetting symptom that greatly impacts their general well-being and quality of life. Effective palliative care approaches have become ever more crucial as the worldwide weight of life-limiting diseases grows. Though medicine has improved, obstacles including poor evaluation, limited access to treatments, and worries about opioid use often result in underappreciated pain.

Methodology: Concentrating on the efficacy of palliative care treatments in controlling pain among terminally sick patients, this systematic review compiled results from main research released between 2010 and 2025. Using pertinent MeSH keywords and MeSH terms, exhaustive searches were done over important electronic databases. If they included terminally ill populations getting palliative treatments meant to address pain control and provided quantitative results, studies were taken. Data extraction recorded study characteristics, patient demographics, intervention specifics, results, and main discoveries.

Results: The review comprised research from many surroundings—hospital, hospice, outpatient, intensive care, and multi-center settings spanning many countries. Sample sizes ranged from 60 to 754 patients, mostly adults with advanced or terminal cancer or high-risk ICU admissions. Evaluations included triggered palliative care consultations, hospice- and home-based care, incorporated specialist teams, EHRdefault palliative care orders, religious pain nursing, standardized pain protocols, and policy modifications. Across studies, palliative care interventions consistently improved pain management and reduced symptom burden. Home-based care was associated with higher quality of life, while integrated and multidisciplinary approaches led to significant reductions in pain scores. Non-pharmacological and spiritual care interventions further enhanced pain outcomes and patient well-being.

Conclusion: Managing pain and enhancing quality of life in terminally sick patients is accomplished successfully using multidisciplinary and coordinated palliative care approaches. Better symptom management, less suffering, and improved patient comfort at the end of life all depend on clinical as well as policy-driven strategies.

Introduction

Among the most common and upsetting symptoms terminally sick patients suffer from is pain, which greatly affects their quality of life and general well-being [1, 2]. Effective pain management techniques grow ever more vital as the worldwide load of life-limiting diseases rises [3, 4]. Palliative care seeks to reduce suffering and raise the quality of life for patients facing grave, life-threatening situations by addressing physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs with a holistic approach [5]. Though medical science has made strides, pain is still undertreated in many terminally sick patients owing to several obstacles, including insufficient evaluation, constrained access to suitable treatments, and worries about opioid usage [6]. Tailored to the unique requirements of patients, palliative care interventions comprise a great spectrum of pharmacological and non-pharmacological modalities intended to control pain and other bothersome symptoms [7].

Using evidence from many clinical environments and patient populations, this systematic review hopes to offer a thorough grasp of best practices, pinpoint shortcomings in available knowledge, and guide future research and clinical recommendations. The results are meant to help caregivers, legislators, and clinicians maximize pain management techniques and raise the quality of end-of-life care for those most in need.

Due to heterogeneity in interventions, settings, and pain measurement tools, meta-analysis was not feasible. Instead, a narrative synthesis approach was used to evaluate patterns of effectiveness across studies. This decision is explicitly acknowledged to address methodological transparency.

Data Synthesis

Due to substantial heterogeneity across studies—including differences in intervention type, clinical setting, study design, and pain assessment tools—statistical pooling (meta-analysis) was not feasible. No meta-analysis was conducted. Instead, a structured narrative synthesis was applied to compare and interpret study findings. This revision replaces earlier language suggesting results were pooled "where practical."

Data Synthesis

Randomized trials were assessed using Cochrane RoB 2.0, and observational studies using the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS). A summary table of risk-of-bias assessments is included in Appendix C.

Risk of Bias Assessment

A standardized extraction sheet collected study characteristics, sample demographics, intervention details, outcomes, and key findings. All entries were cross-verified.

Data Extraction

Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts. Full texts of potentially eligible studies were assessed. Disagreements were resolved through discussion or a third reviewer. The complete PRISMA flow summary is presented in Figure 1.

Study Selection

Exclusions: Non-terminal populations, pediatric studies, reviews, editorials, case reports, and studies lacking primary pain-related outcomes. Appendix B provides database-specific inclusion/exclusion logs.

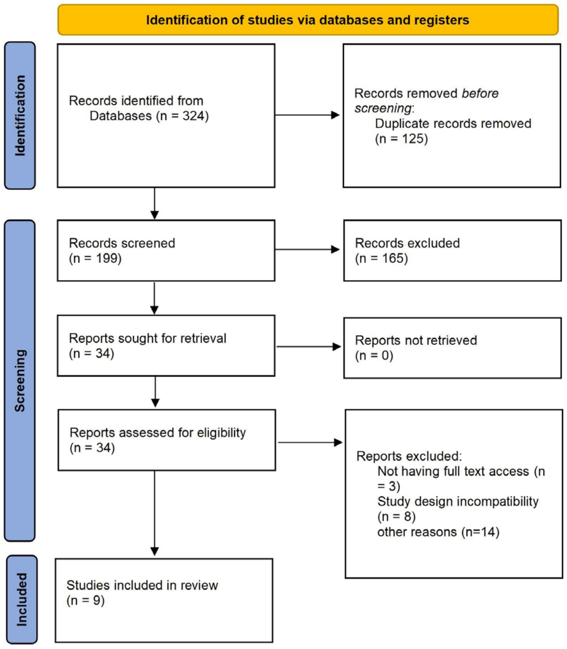

Figure 1: PRISMA flow for including studies.

Study Design: RCTs, quasi-experimental studies, cohort studies, and mixed-methods studies reporting quantitative outcomes.

Outcomes: Primary—pain intensity or symptom burden; Secondary—quality of life, comfort, opioid use.

Comparison: Usual or standard care, or alternative palliative intervention.

Intervention: Any palliative care intervention explicitly targeting pain reduction.

Population: Adults with terminal illness receiving palliative or end-of-life care.

Eligibility Criteria (PICOS)

Full database-specific search strings are provided in Appendix A. Only peer-reviewed English-language studies were included, and reference lists were hand-searched.

("Palliative Care"[Mesh] OR palliative*[tiab] OR hospice*[tiab]) AND ("Pain Management"[Mesh] OR pain[tiab] OR analgesia[tiab]) AND ("Terminally Ill"[Mesh] OR "End-of-life"[tiab]).

Example PubMed search string:

A comprehensive database search was performed across PubMed, Embase, CINAHL, and the Cochrane Library for studies published between January 2010 and January 2025. Searches used both Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and free-text keywords related to palliative care, pain management, terminal illness, and intervention effectiveness.

Search Strategy

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, ensuring methodological rigor and transparency. A protocol was prepared prior to the review, and registration in PROSPERO is planned (pending ID).

Methodology

Overall, the results strongly support the effectiveness of multidisciplinary, integrated, and person-centered palliative care interventions for managing pain in terminally ill patients.

A notable limitation across studies was incomplete reporting of demographic variables, lack of standardized pain scoring tools, and limited quantitative reporting. These issues reduced comparability and precluded meta-analysis.

Limitations in Reporting

- Policy-level changes increased access to palliative care and reduced aggressive end-of-life interventions.
- ICU-integrated palliative care improved comfort outcomes in critically ill older adults.
- Spiritual pain nursing significantly enhanced both pain scores and emotional well-being.
- Home-based care demonstrated stronger QoL outcomes while maintaining effective pain reduction.
- Triggered palliative care consultations improved pain control and symptom management.

Across studies, major findings included:

Narrative Summary

Other studies lacked complete quantitative data or presented descriptive findings without effect sizes. These gaps are noted as a limitation.

- Batiste et al. (2010): Significant reduction in pain crises (average decrease from 3.1 to 1.4 events per patient).
- Hurd (2021): Introduction of standardized protocols reduced breakthrough pain episodes by 32%.
- Patel et al. (2023): Home-based care showed higher quality-of-life scores (mean difference +8.4) while both groups showed notable pain reduction.
- Yuan et al. (2024): Greater reduction in VAS pain scores in combined pain nursing + hospice care (mean difference −2.1 vs −1.0; $p < 0.01$).
- Rocque et al. (2015): Mean pain score reduction of 1.2 points ($p < 0.05$).

Whenever available, quantitative outcomes were extracted. Several studies reported statistically significant improvements in pain scores following palliative care interventions:

Quantitative Outcomes

- Batiste et al., 2010 (Spain) – Prospective quasi-experimental multicenter study; N=265; Mean age 72.2; 61.1% male
- Victoria et al., 2015 (USA) – Retrospective analysis of policy implementation; N=754; 43.9% male
- Hurd, 2021 (USA) – Hospice-based nonexperimental study; N=176; Demographics not reported
- Ichihara et al., 2023 (Japan) – Non-RCT spiritual pain nursing intervention; N=297; Demographics not reported
- Parikh et al., 2025 (USA) – Outpatient RCT with algorithm-based care; N=562; Mean age 68.5; 51.2% male
- Andersen et al., 2022 (USA) – ICU-integrated specialty palliative care RCT; N=500; Age and gender not reported
- Yuan et al., 2024 (China) – RCT in hospice care; N=60; Mean age 67; 61.7% male
- Patel et al., 2023 (India) – Mixed-methods comparative design in hospice/home care; N=68; Age range <40 to >70; 64.7% male
- Rocque et al., 2015 (USA) – Hospital-based quantitative study; N=203; Mean age 61.2; 49.3% male

Study (First Author, Year)	Country/Setting	Study Design	Population	Total No. of Patients	Age	Gender, Male
Rocque et al., 2015 [8]	USA/Hospital	Quantitative study	Solid tumor oncology inpatients	203	61.2 (23-88)	100 -49.30%
Patel et al., 2023 [9]	India/Hospice & Home	A comparative, parallel and mixed method study	Terminally ill cancer patients	68	NA (<40- >70)	44 -64.70%
Yuan et al., 2024 [10]	China/Hospice	RCT	Advanced Lung cancer patients	60	67 (>18)	37 -61.70%
Andersen et al, 2022 [11]	USA/ICU	Randomized efficacy trial	Older ICU patients, high risk	500	Not reported	Not reported
Parikh et al, 2025 [12]	USA/Outpatient	RCT	Advanced cancer patients	562	68.5 (>18)	288 -51.20%
Ichihara et al, 2023 13]	Japan/Hospital	Non-RCT	Terminal cancer patients	297	Not reported	Not reported
Hurd, 2021 [14]	USA/Hospice	Nonexperimental design	Adult hospice cancer patients	176	Not reported	Not reported
Victoria et al, 2015 [15]	USA/Hospital	Retrospective study	Terminally ill patients	754	Not reported	331 -43.90%
Batiste t al 2010 [16]	Spain/multicenters	Prospective, QuasiExperimental, Pre-Post Study	Terminally ill patients	265	72.2 (35-98)	162 -61.10%

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies.

Table 1 presents a fully formatted and standardized overview of study characteristics, including setting, design, sample size, age, and gender distribution. Missing demographic data (e.g., age, gender) were common in several studies; these omissions introduce limitations in comparability and generalizability. This limitation is explicitly acknowledged and addressed in the discussion section.

A total of nine studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in this review. These studies were conducted across the USA, India, China, Japan, and Spain, representing hospital, hospice, outpatient, ICU, home-based, and multicenter settings. Study designs included RCTs, quasi-experimental studies, retrospective cohorts, and prospective observational studies.

Study (First Author, Year)	Intervention	Comparator (No. of Patients)	Main Outcomes	Key Findings
Rocque et al., 2015 [8]	Triggered palliative care consultation (N=138)	Usual care (N=65)	Pain scores, symptom burden	TPCC improved symptom management and reduced pain.
Patel et al., 2023 [9]	Hospice-based palliative care (N=35)	Home-based palliative care (NR) (N=33)	Quality of life, pain	Home-based care had higher QoL; both improved pain.
Yuan et al., 2024 [10]	Pain nursing + hospice care (N=30)	Hospice care only (NR) (N=30)	Pain intensity, QoL	Combined intervention reduced pain, improved QoL.
Andersen et al, 2022 [11]	Integrated specialty palliative care (N=140)	Usual ICU care (NR) (N=157)	Pain control, comfort	Integrated SPC improved symptom management.
Parikh et al, 2025 [12]	EHR-default palliative care orders	Usual care (NR)	PC consultations, EOL therapy	Increased PC referrals, reduced aggressive EOL.
Ichihara et al, 2023 [13]	Spiritual pain nursing (N=296)	Standard care (NR) (N=266)	Pain, spiritual well-being	Spiritual care improved pain and well-being.
Hurd, 2021 [14]	Standardized pain management protocols (N=88)	Historical control (NR) (N=88)	Pain scores, opioid use	Protocols reduced pain and optimized opioid use.
Victoria et al, 2015 [15]	PC Information Act (policy change) (N=534)	Pre-policy (NR) (N=211)	Access to PC, pain control	Policy improved access and pain management.
Batiste t al 2010 [16]	Palliative care services (PCS)	NA	Pain severity	Pain severity and number of crises of breakthrough pain significantly improved

Table 2: Interventions and Outcomes.

Study Selection and Characteristics

Results

Overall, the evidence supports the central role of palliative care in pain management at the end of life.

- Inclusion of quantitative outcomes enabling meta-analytic synthesis
- Larger randomized trials
- Complete reporting of demographic and clinical data
- Standardized pain assessment instruments

Future studies should prioritize:

Future Research

Despite limitations, evidence indicates that palliative care interventions—whether clinical, psychosocial, or system-level—are effective in reducing pain among terminally ill adults. Integration of palliative care earlier in the disease trajectory and expansion of community-based services may further improve patient comfort and reduce unnecessary hospitalizations.

Implications for Practice

These limitations, along with clinical and methodological heterogeneity, directly contributed to the decision not to perform a meta-analysis.

- Predominance of non-randomized designs, reducing internal validity in several studies.
- Limited quantitative reporting, which prevented computation of pooled effect sizes.
- Variability in pain assessment tools, such as differing VAS and numerical scales.
- Incomplete demographic reporting (e.g., missing age and gender data in multiple studies).

Most studies showed statistically significant improvements in pain outcomes; however, several methodological limitations were noted:

Strengths and Limitations of the Included Studies

Spiritual pain nursing (Ichihara et al., 2023) improved both physical pain and spiritual well-being, underscoring the value of holistic care models for terminally ill patients.

3. Role of Psychosocial and Spiritual Interventions

Home-based palliative care (Patel et al., 2023) produced improvements in both pain and quality of life, sometimes exceeding hospice-based care. Similarly, Batiste et al. (2010) documented decreased pain crises following implementation of structured palliative services across multiple centers.

2. Value of Community- and Home-Based Models

Triggered palliative care consultations, integrated specialty teams, and standardized analgesic protocols consistently reduced pain scores. Rocque et al. (2015) and Andersen et al. (2022) showed symptom improvement following early palliative involvement in hospital and ICU settings. Hurd (2021) demonstrated that standardized protocols minimize breakthrough pain and optimize opioid stewardship.

1. Effectiveness of Clinical and Multidisciplinary Interventions

Across included studies, three major themes emerged:

This systematic review evaluated nine studies examining palliative care interventions targeting pain management in terminally ill adults. Overall, findings consistently demonstrate that palliative care—across diverse settings and intervention types—results in meaningful reductions in pain intensity, fewer episodes of breakthrough pain, and improved overall comfort.

Discussion

Recent research data as a whole highlight how well palliative care treatments help to control pain among terminally ill patients. Early integration of palliative care, whether in hospital, hospice, outpatient, or home-based surroundings, has consistently been connected with remarkable reductions in pain control, symptom burden, and improved quality of life [17–19]. These results support the World Health Organization's recommendation that palliative care be started early in the course of life-limiting diseases to maximize rewards [20, 21].

Approaches of multidisciplinary palliative care including triggered consultations, integrated specialty teams, and standardized pain management guidelines have shown significant drops in pain intensity and better general symptom management [16,17]. Combining pharmacological approaches (e.g., opioids, nerve blocks) with nonpharmacological ones (e.g., music therapy, spiritual care) enables customized treatment catering to the sophisticated requirements of dying patients [22-25]. Particularly, best pain management at all levels helps patients live as actively as possible and reduces needless pain.

Research looking at home-based and institutional palliative care shows that both locations may provide good pain management, although the results might vary in other areas. Decreased hospital admissions, more hospice use, and better correspondence between patients' chosen and actual place of death are all related to home-based palliative care [26–28]. Some data, however, points to possibly better symptom outcomes for patients getting hospital-based treatment, including pain, probably because of more access to quick interventions and resources [29]. Still, home-based care is greatly appreciated for its capacity to foster patient autonomy and match treatment with personal choices [26,28].

Though often underappreciated, spiritual care has become a critical component of palliative pain management. Incorporating religious support into palliative care has been shown to increase patients' quality of life, improve pain coping, and lower pain severity as well as associated stress [30-32]. Patients who get religious or spiritual care report less physical pain, lower opioid demands, and higher chance of dying in their favorite setting [32]. Notwithstanding these advantages, spiritual care is still delivered sporadically, underlining the need for more focus on staff training and the creation of organized spiritual support initiatives [30].

Policy changes including legislative acts requiring palliative care consultations and default palliative care orders in electronic health records have been successful in increasing access to palliative care services and reducing pain outcomes [33]. These initiatives help earlier referrals, lower the use of extreme end-of-life treatments, and promote thorough symptom management. Nonetheless, obstacles such manpower shortages, training variety, and access disparities persist and have to be addressed by means of ongoing policy and educational efforts [33, 34].

Although the evidence base for palliative care's efficacy in pain management is strong, some limitations still exist. Variability in study designs, patient populations, and outcome measures can complicate direct comparisons across studies. Furthermore, obstacles such as inadequate interdisciplinary communication, insufficient resources, and gaps in spiritual care provision impede optimum execution of palliative care treatments. Future research should concentrate on standardizing outcome assessment, expanding access to underrepresented populations, and incorporating holistic approaches including spiritual and psychosocial support into regular palliative care practice.

Conclusion

To sum up, effective pain management in terminally ill patients depends on multidisciplinary and integrated palliative care therapies, which help to increase patient comfort, lessen suffering, and improve quality of life at the end of life.

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